

**Presentation by
March of Dimes Canada/Ontario March of Dimes
to the
Standing Committee on Social Policy**

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Speakers:

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Janet Macmaster:

Good afternoon. My name is Janet Macmaster, and I coordinate Government Relations at March of Dimes. With me today are my colleagues Steven Christianson, National Manager of Government Relations and Advocacy, Bobbi Moore, a March of Dimes advocate, and our associate, Frank Nyitray. We are most appreciative of this opportunity to speak to Bill 152, the Poverty Reduction Act.

I would like to start off by stating that March of Dimes supports the principles and goals of Bill 152 and the government's intention to tackle poverty in Ontario in a substantive and measurable way. Of course, we bring a somewhat different perspective on what poverty actually is for someone with a disability, and we will explain this in a moment, as well as highlighting areas that we feel could enhance Bill 152.

While the initial focus will be on children, a move we applaud, the Bill does make specific reference to disability, and appropriately so. Disability can affect anyone

at any age at any time. It may be present at the time of birth, the result of an injury or illness, or simply part of the natural aging process. So we are very happy to bring our perspective to this Committee.

First let us give you a brief overview of March of Dimes.

Frank Nyitray:

In nearly 6 decades March of Dimes has evolved from a research-focused organization, raising \$14,000 in 1951 to eradicate the threat of polio into an organization with an annual operating budget in excess of \$90 million with which we provide a diverse range of services that help more than 40,000 consumers across Canada to live independently and participate in community life. This evolution reflects our commitment to a strategic approach of identifying need, overcoming obstacles, adapting to change and embracing emerging opportunities to improve the lives of the people we serve.

Who are the people we serve? When one looks at our consumer base one begins to get a perspective of the relationship between disability and poverty.

Disability and poverty often have a tendency to go hand in hand
80% of March of Dimes consumers have personal incomes of less than \$20,000,
and 91% have incomes below \$30,000.

A staggering 40% of the people we serve, based on data from the 2007-2008 fiscal year, have incomes less than \$10,000 per year.

72% of the service expenditures of March of Dimes assist people with incomes below \$20,000.

65% of our consumers are over the age of 55, while 2.5% are under 19 years old.

According to the government's statistical information on the website for Community and Social Services, 1.85 million people in Ontario have a disability, and nearly half (49.5%) between the ages of 15 and 64 are unemployed.

Steven Christianson:

Safe to say, we know quite a bit about poverty and its relationship to someone who lives with a disability. And I want to emphasize that when we speak of poverty we mean both social as well economic conditions.

To this degree we are pleased to see reference in the Bill to the importance of communities and families. We are pleased to see benchmarks such as dignity, respect and participation in the planning and public policy process. As I've mentioned, the principles and goals are laudable.

Will it work?

Let me reference a few words contained in the wording, found under the heading "Importance of all Ontarians": That there is untapped potential in Ontario's population that needs to be drawn upon by building and establishing supports for, and eliminating barriers to, full participation by all people in Ontario's economy and society."

Supports and barriers are also key terms and concepts that we at March of Dimes are very familiar with. The success of this legislation will ultimately be found in those very supports and the barriers they help eliminate.

We know what works in our world. We've consulted widely in other jurisdictions to know what works around the world.

For Bill 152 to tackle poverty in a sustainable way for people with disabilities, we know that one of the supports we're going to have to build will involve two things

that facilitate participation in community, independence in one's home, and greater involvement in society and the economy. Those two things are homecare, or what some call caregiving, and home modifications. Most importantly, the two need to be treated as inter-related.

Let me explain.

Today's emerging and growing need for caregiving supports and home modifications for people with disabilities – both of which need to be formulated as a caregiving strategy – require new solutions. Solutions that require the expertise and program design feedback not just from one Ministry, or one program branch, or one service delivery agency, but many. In order to develop everyday solutions, we'll require the expertise of many disciplines and perspectives to breathe life into the work that will turn this Bill into a reality, that is, ultimately not just reducing poverty, but preventing it.

For Ontarians with disabilities, in our experience, as well as in the experience from many jurisdictions around the world, a caregiving strategy that includes homecare supports and home modifications that meet and anticipate societal need, reduce the costs to government, help reduce and prevent individuals and families from living in poverty.

I mention the fact that we consider other jurisdictions because Ontario is one of the few without such a comprehensive caregiving strategy that supports homecare and home modifications.

We are making progress on a number of fronts, notably the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act as well as several measures announced in this year's budget.

But a strategy put in practice to address, alleviate, and prevent poverty among Ontarians with disabilities, as well as their families and caregivers, must necessarily recognize the fact that the need for such supports today exceeds the available supply of program dollars, and the need is growing each year.

Since 1999, March of Dimes has administered the Home and Vehicle Modification Program – a program that provides financial assistance to Ontarians with disabilities to install such things as door-openers, ramps, lifts, grab-bars in a washroom. These modifications allow some to remain in their home, in their community. In the 2008-2009 fiscal year we had to reject nearly 50% of all applications – not because the applicants were ineligible, but due to lack of funding. The bottom line is that a modification to the home can allow greater independence – for example, a spouse can continue working instead of having to reduce work hours to care for the spouse with the disability.

Delivering care to someone in their own home is not only less expensive than long-term or chronic care, it's simply a better option that provides greater quality of life. And a high quality of life is a very effective measure against poverty.

I'm now going to ask my colleague, Bobbi Moore, to speak to specifics in Bill 152.

Bobbi Moore:

We feel that Clause 5, under the title, “regular consultation”, is not specific enough. We feel there should be clearly established timeframes as a starting point for regular consultation, then an additional provision of additional times to meet as considered appropriate by the Minister. We recommend that specific reference be made to the following: an annual meeting of an advisory body, with Cabinet representation, be charged with identifying the “champion” programs or services that sector and Cabinet representatives deem most effective in tackling and alleviating poverty. Bill 152 identifies a number of specific populations, such

people with disabilities, immigrants, and women, and we feel it appropriate to consult annually with key stakeholders in each of these groups.

As regards Ontarians with disabilities, we look to the AODA with hope. Herein is the legislation that will remove the barriers to participation and inclusion – the very barriers that can and often do lead to poverty. The barriers to employment, to housing, to adequate personal supports. We recommend incorporating a reference to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act in Bill 152 for people with disabilities.

The initial focus and a principle goal in this Bill is on children. We applaud this focus. We recommend that an equal ongoing focus will tackle poverty in other populations. To that end, we feel that the Minister charged with responsibility of this legislation be referred to as “the Minister responsible for Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy”. Disability can hit anyone at any time, and with that, so too can the increased chances of living in poverty.

Hopefully, our collective efforts will lead to new programs, policies, and, most importantly, everyday solutions that we continually revisit and critique to set in motion a path of ongoing improvement in the polices and programs that affect our lives, and ensure that all Ontarians – particularly those in more vulnerable populations – participate in all aspects of our society and economy.

Honourable Members, thank you for this opportunity.